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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000413

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN REGIME EMERGES STRONGER FROM PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Winners in the April 22-23 elections for Syria's Peoples Assembly included all 170 members of the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF) coalition, which the Ba'ath Party leads, in addition to 80 "independents." In the NPF, the Ba'ath Party increased its seats by two to 134 seats. All of the 80 so-called independents who won for office were in one way or another officially sanctioned by the regime, as all received approval for their candidacies and their platforms, as required by law. Losses were registered by a number of independents, who in the past have offered criticisms of the regime. Based on our observations and contacts, the true level of voter turnout is only a fraction of the official claim. Syrian observers cited a number of possible reasons for the low turnout, including voter conviction that the Parliament has no power, the widespread belief that wealthy candidates had been guaranteed a win, and even declining voter fear of the regime retaliation for not voting. In the end, the results reinforced slightly the Ba'ath Party's--and the regime's--absolute stronghold on the People's Assembly. Some Syrian observers have suggested that this is intended to serve as a warning to the internal opposition prior to the upcoming Presidential referendum and pre-empt the possibility of any surprises during the cameo role the Assembly plays in nominating Bashar al-Assad for a second term. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) WINNERS AND LOSERS: Syria's Minister of Interior officially announced April 26 the results of the People's Assembly elections at a press conference in Damascus. Winners included all 170 members of the ruling NPF coalition, in addition to 80 "independents." In the NPF, the Ba'ath Party increased its seats by two to 134 seats. Of the other nine groups in the NPF coalition, the National Pledge Party and the Syrian Socialist National Party both registered gains going from two to three seats, while the Arab Socialist Unionist Party saw its seats decline from seven to six. The number of women parliamentarians remain at around 30 persons and most are from the NPF.

¶3. (SBU) Election abnormalities in Raqqa Province, in tandem with the governor's announced plans there to redo voting in 20 election centers, led to rioting by members of local tribes, finally ending with a settlement between officials of the two concerned tribes in which each tribe was allocated one of the two contested seats, according to press reports. Some unconfirmed press reports suggested that earlier up to 10,000 people had blocked the highway between Raqqa and nearby city Deir-ez-Zour and stoned the local police chief's car. A website, which is banned in Syria and belongs to the

London-based Syrian Muslim Brothers, reported that 530 people were arrested in the rioting, and a London-based Syrian human rights group said that security forces had badly beaten some detainees and that others were being deprived food and having their heads shaved.

¶4. (C) All of the 80 "independents" who won were in one way or another officially sanctioned by the regime, as all received approval for their candidacies and their platforms, as required by law. They also were not obstructed by whisper campaigns and more aggressive security service tactics that decimated the chances of a small group of independents considered to be insufficiently loyal to the regime. The top "independent" was businessman Mohammed Hamsho, who is close to Maher al-Asad. He obtained more than 80,000 votes, despite earlier rumors that some Ba'ath Party officials were encouraging a voter boycott of his candidacy. None of the unlicensed opposition parties fielded candidates. (Note: The head of the opposition's Damascus Declaration group and a former MP, Riad Seif, told A/DCM on April 26 that he believed his group's decision to boycott had been vindicated, given the regime's tight control over every aspect of the election process, including the selectively enforced requirement that all candidates get permission 48 hours in advance for election-related meetings. See septel for further Seif comments. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Losses were registered by a number of independents, who in the past have offered criticisms of the regime, such as Embassy political contacts and former MPs Ihsan Sankar and Basil Dahdouh of the Development and Modernization list, who ran in Damascus. In northeastern Hassakeh Province, independent candidate and Syrian-American Bassam Ishak also

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lost. On March 27, the regime withdrew its permission for the candidacy of another Development and Modernization candidate, businessman Adnan Shama'a, citing a former criminal conviction from the late 1980s, despite Shama'a claim that he had never been convicted and that, even had he been found guilty, the 10-year "rights ban" as prescribed in the legal code had run out.

¶6. (C) VOTER TURNOUT: The Minister stated that more than 56 percent of the 7.1 million Syrians with voting cards participated in the elections. Based on observations by U.S. and other diplomats and journalists who informally visited a number of polling places in the capital and surrounding cities during the April 22-23 voting, the true percentage is likely only a tiny fraction of the official claim. Without exception, all of our Syrian interlocutors also stated that the government had greatly inflated voter participation, including political/economic analyst Riad Abrash who estimated the first day's turnout at 1-2 percent. Former MP and political prisoner Mamoun Homsi, who left Syria under pressure in 2006, issue a statement calling the elections fraudulent and asserting that voter turnout had ranged between 6 and 10 percent. In the statement, Homsi said that in eight districts, authorities had blocked Christian candidates, resulting in wins by only 16 Christians, with 13 of them coming from the NPF.

¶7. (C) Some Syrian observers based the low turnout on voter conviction that the Parliament has no power. For example, an April 27 election statement by the Damascus Declaration group decrying the elections cited articles 111, 112, and 113 of the Constitution, which allow the Syrian President the authority to assume legislative authority "to safeguard the country's national interests or the requirements of national security." The statement also pointed to the Emergency Law in place in Syria for 44 years, noting it gives the regime "the unconditional ability to conduct the fate, future, and fortunes of the country and provides a foundation for widespread corruption, leaving citizens to live in very poor conditions."

¶8. (C) Other Syrians attributed the lack of voter participation to the public's view that wealthy individuals, some of whom spent tens of thousands of dollars on campaign materials, must have already obtained the government's backing and were thus guaranteed a win. Separately, a Syrian businessman attributed the low turnout to declining voter fear of the regime's apparatus to retaliate against those who did not participate, at least in this round of elections. Many Syrians were likely to feel obligated to vote, however, in the upcoming Presidential referendum, now widely rumored to be held in late May, for fear that the absence of a participation stamp on their voter identification card would hinder their efforts to obtain subsequent government services, according to contacts.

¶9. (C) WHAT'S NEXT: Some contacts have told us that President Asad intends to address the new Parliament at one of its first sessions as early as the end of this week although no date has yet been publicly set. According to the Constitution's Article 60, the new National Assembly is invited to meet by a presidential decree within 15 days from the official announcement of election results; if no decree is issued, then the Assembly meets on the 16th day.

¶10. (SBU) Contacts have also told us that the Presidential referendum is likely to take place earlier than previously expected, possibly in late May. According to the Constitution's Article 84, the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command must first send a single proposed candidate to the People's Assembly, which in turn then issues an order for the holding of a presidential plebiscite. The Constitution stipulates that the new president is elected before termination of the term of the present President, "within a period of no fewer than 30 days and not more than 60 days. (Note: Bashar took office on July 17, 2000, meaning that the referendum should theoretically occur between May 17 and June ¶16. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Based on news reports and our observations, almost no one in Syria got excited about the elections and especially not the opposition and the voters. The number of so-called independent candidates reportedly hit a record high at more than 2,000 during these elections, although most of

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them were candidates who had any chance of winning. By all accounts some of these independents, especially in Damascus, poured thousands of dollars into their campaigns, with some surpassing by wide margins the USD 60,000 limit set by the regime. At the same time, the government used a variety of means in a futile effort to underscore the supposed transparency of the voting, including an April 4 editorial in an official mouthpiece, Tishreen newspaper, criticizing the absence of in-depth candidate platforms (but without mentioning that the government required all candidates to receive authorizations for their programs). The SARG also publicly highlighted election "innovations" such as using transparent ballot boxes, indelible ink to denote who had cast a ballot, and even cameras in all of the polling places in Homs Province.

¶12. (C) Comment: It is clear that behind the scenes and throughout the election process (including the run-up to it) that the regime sought to close any openings that its opponents might use to voice their criticisms. Now that the People's Assembly elections are over, the end result is a regime that has further strengthened the absolute majority of its ruling coalition in the People's Assembly from 66.8 percent of all seats to 68 percent. Some Syrian observers have suggested to us that this is intended to serve as a warning to the internal opposition prior to the Presidential referendum and pre-empt the possibility, however remote, of any surprises during the cameo role the Assembly is required to play in nominating Bashar for his second seven-year term. More broadly, the regime's efforts to put a complete stranglehold on the parliamentary elections, when in years

past it had allowed a slight bit of competition and uncertainty over a few independent seats, are meant to signal the Syrian people--and the international community--that the regime is strong and at the present time will brook no dissent or allow any openings for political reform.

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